

## In what language did the Buddha preach? Review of Richard Gombrich's *Buddhism and Pali*, Mud Pie Slices 2018.

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*Buddhism and Pali* is one of the first books published in series *Fresh Angles on Buddhism* by Mud Pie Slices. The series is a concise set of books, touching different aspect of Buddhism, to-date it consists of *Buddhism and Myth*, *Buddhism and the Brain*, *Buddhism and God*, and *Buddhism and Football*. Richard Gombrich is a distinguished scholar in Buddhism, professor emeritus of Sanskrit at Oxford University, author of numerous publications on Buddhism, and chair and founder of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies. His most important contributions include *What the Buddha Thought* (2009), *How Buddhism Began: the Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (1996), and *Theravāda Buddhism: a social history from ancient Benares to modern Colombo* (1988).

The book aims to introduce the Pali language in an intelligible way to people who are not experts in Pali or linguistics. The book comprises of four chapters: “Pali in history”, “The Linguistic character of Pali”, “Pali prose style”, and “Pali in Buddhist ideology”. The book first introduces us to the name and historical associations of the language, as well as the history of the Pali over the centuries. The second part is dedicated to the basic linguistic features of Pali, including information of phonetics, prosody, syntax, and verse. The third chapter explains features of Pali prose: the memorisation, use of repetition, and the style of canonical Pali prose. The last chapter, “Pali in Buddhist ideology”, sheds light on Pali relations with Sanskrit, the pragmatics of the language, and introduces a new perspective on the Buddha's teaching – the theory that Pali could be the language that Buddha used while preaching. The book concludes with the epilogue “The future of Pali”, reflecting on author's experience with teaching and popularisation of Pali language.

The book serves as an introduction, one could read as a Pali student novice as it provides basic information on language in simple and approachable way. The book takes care to explain Pali without cryptic linguistic terminology found in most textbooks. It can be of interest to linguists, and yet at the same time not require the specialist knowledge of linguistic jargon. The explanations of verse features and prose style (e.g. the use repetition in the Pali texts) is worthy of attention for anyone trying to read Pali texts, even if only for translation.

Gombrich introduces two particularly interesting new insights into the teaching of the Buddha that make it worthy of attention for Buddhist scholars and students of Buddhist studies. We come across the first notable point in the first chapter, where the name of the language is explained. On page 11, Gombrich states that in his opinion the word Pali was derived from the root verb *path* (to recite), thus, Pali could be interpreted as “the text for recitation.” Continuing on page 14, the “text for recitation” was contrasted with other text, particularly commentaries on the term *attha-kathā* is translated as “telling the meaning.” Chapter four introduces the most innovative idea of the book, it is where Gombrich states that Pali is the language that “the Buddha spoke, at least when preaching.” Gombrich explains: “The Buddha was continuously travelling through a large area of north-eastern India, and as he moved from village to village he had to communicate in [a] range of dialects. So presumably he had to work out, for his own use, something which would serve as a lingua franca. [...] It could also have developed as years went by and the early Buddhists were trying to make their texts intelligible in a wider geographical area” (2018, p70). Other interesting remarks are introduced as reflections on the forms we can find in Pali – “I attribute this remarkable variety to dialect variation, in the sense that Pali includes material, especially optional forms, from various dialects.” This leads to the hypothesis that the language in which the Buddha taught is a type of argot and was used to address a multilingual audience across ancient India. Although the Pali language of the Pali canon (a collection of scriptures) may not be the very same language the Buddha spoke, it could be some later version of it that underwent a process of standardisation. Gombrich concludes that part with this passage: “My theory, then, is that Pali reflects the idiosyncratic language used by the Buddha as he toured north-east India and communicated with a population ranging from brahmins to untouchables. When after some years his followers wrote down what he said and made some attempt to



standardise it by giving it a set of grammar and an orthography, they were to some extent guided by the only grammar and orthography that existed in their culture, those of Sanskrit, but they were also concerned to retain as best they could the precise characteristics of their teacher's language as preserved by their oral tradition" (2018, p. 84–85).

It is worth mentioning that the last chapter provides an interesting perspective on Buddhist teachings. Gombrich explains how the Buddha's approach to language reflects the essence of his teachings by drawing examples from contemporary Asian Buddhist communities. Description of Buddha's pragmatism, and following "the spirit, not the letter" of his teachings exemplifies critical thinking one needs when studying the texts, it is important to not adhere to the literal meaning or dogmatism.

The book might also be of considerable interest to teachers of Pali and Sanskrit. Gombrich not only introduces Pali in a very approachable way, but also shares his ideas on how to teach this ancient language in a way that is effective and engaging for students. Apart from its main purpose, *Buddhism and Pali* gives insight into professor Gombrich's experiences of learning, teaching and popularising the Pali language. In the epilogue Gombrich shares his valuable experience of teaching Pali in a university and non-university environment: to university students during his teaching at Oxford, during courses provided by the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies, residential summer courses, and live online courses. The courses were aimed at students from all over the world and do not require being familiar with linguistics or previous study of Sanskrit, yet it enables them to read original texts after just a few days. Gombrich lists pros and cons of each model of teaching proving that teaching an ancient language can be implemented with innovative methods, which is especially important with the demand for online courses. As a teacher of Sanskrit I find the insights into the pedagogy of the ancient Buddhist language especially valuable.

To sum up, the book might be of great interest to both specialists and non-specialists, from scholars and students of Buddhist/Indology studies to virtually anyone interested in Buddhist teaching. The book starts new discussions on the Pali language and the early history of Buddhism, as well as introducing new important hypotheses, making it of significant interest to specialist audiences. It is written in a clear language, avoiding specialist jargon whenever possible and can serve as an introductory book for even the most novice student of Buddhism or the Pali language.



### Note about the author

Joanna GRUSZEWSKA is an assistant professor at the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations Jagiellonian University in Kraków, where she teaches Sanskrit and courses on gender in Buddhism. Her PhD dissertation was defended in 2019 focusing on the depiction of Buddhist nuns in the *Therīgāthā*. She is currently preparing to publish her translation of the *Therīgāthā* from Pali into Polish.

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